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THE WAR

WORD COUNT - 4670

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As a child in England, in the late summer of 1939, I remember hearing talk of 'The Wall.' I was not sure what this wall was about...but then discovered that it was not a wall, but a war. When I asked my mother what a war was, she said it was men fighting. The picture that remains in my head is that of a couple of rough-looking men in shirt sleeves (those were the days when jackets were 'de rigeur' even for working men) having a fist fight in the middle of a street.

I also vaguely remember hearing that Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, had tried to appease Hitler and the Nazis. This turned out to have been an abortive attempt and seen by many as a very unwise move in any case. Mr. Chamberlain, who always sported an umbrella, became unpopular and I do remember the liquorice umbrellas we could buy from the sweet shop. There was also a chant in circulation about umbrellas, the words of which escape me.

Although I don't think I actually remember the following, it was told to me so many times: The day Britain declared war on Germany was a Sunday, 3 September; and Mr. Weeks, our vicar at Walmley Church, announced it from the pulpit at Morning Service.

My next war memory is that of shopping in the local high street for Black-Out material. Until one could afford to buy real black-out curtains, one managed with black construction paper. This was taped to the windows to prevent the indoor light from escaping to the outside. As soon as one could obtain the proper material, heavy, lined black-out curtains were hung at all windows.

As a concomitant to this were the Air Raid Wardens who, some drunk with petty power in their brass-buttoned uniforms, might knock at the door to accuse a homeowner of letting out a sliver of light and thereby helping the 'Jerry' to find his target. Such unpatriotic behaviour was severely frowned upon.

Since black-out curtains could not shroud the moon, on moonlit evenings the Smoke Screens were lit. These large barrels of oil with tall funnels were placed along the sidewalks even in residential areas; and when lit, the heavy black smoke that issued from the funnels not only obscured everything at ground level but also deposited itself as a thick layer of black dust on every possible surface. In spite of efforts to keep out this filth, our homes were infiltrated after a smoke screen burning. We would find that we had even breathed soot up our nostrils when sleeping.

Another assault upon the home were the strips of sticky paper which we glued in a criss-cross design on the inside of the window panes. This Tudor effect was to prevent the windows from shattering when the bombs fell...or more likely when the anti-aircraft artillery thundered away on a nearby hill. We suffered more noise and shaking from the latter than from the enemy bombs, and were told repeatedly that the guns were there to protect us. I still hear our mother's voice trying to comfort us with these words.

On our way to school on the mornings after an air raid, armed with shoeboxes we would collect shrapnel from the gun shells and became quite competitive as we scoured the ground for these pieces of molten metal. We had always to take our gas masks with us in case of an attack and could not enter school without; one day I forgot mine and was thus forced to trudge back home for it. The masks, issued to us from an A.R.P. Station, came in plain cardboard boxes but soon the ladies would be buying

decorative cases to rival their handbags. Fortunately, we were spared any gas attacks, but we did have gas mask practice at school every Friday.

Being claustrophobic, I hated putting mine on and prayed I would never have to use it for 'real.' The pre-schoolers had Mickey Mouse gas masks, and babies were to be put into a 'lung' which the parents would (hopefully!) keep pumped with air. Luckily, none of these were ever actually needed in the U.K.

Until the war started, my brother and I were attending the small village school in Walmley, a less populated area just over a mile away and outside the City boundary. When war was declared, however, this school was 'closed' and we were required to attend periodically to drop off completed homework and pick up new assignments. Whilst doing some of this homework on the dining room table, one of us spilled ink (no ball points in those days) on to the tablecloth. That was ENOUGH. The very next Monday, Mother packed us off to another school a little closer to home on Pype Hayes housing estate. This school did not close down...and we were expected to be there on time every morning, even if there had been an air raid the previous night.

At that time, numbers at school had been reduced when many youngsters were evacuated to safer places. Interestingly, many of them soon returned home for various reasons. I can remember hearing a mother talking to our headmaster about the poor treatment her child had received as an evacuee in someone else's home. I, on the other hand, dearly wished to be 'an evacuee' (it held a certain glamour for me), and for some time there was talk of my being evacuated, along with my brother, to the Vicarage at Middleton, whose incumbent vicar was a friend of the family and had married our parents. Middleton was a tiny hamlet in the country and, while only six miles from our home, was considered to be perfectly safe. This old vicarage had sixteen rooms and a large sloping lawn that a child could roll down. However, for various reasons the idea of sending us there died, and we lived through the bombing at home in a moderately unsafe area.

Although living on the very outskirts of Birmingham, I learned later that it was our district which received the first bombs from the Luftwaffe in August 1940. Nuffield's and then Vickers-Armstrong, engaged in the production of more than half the Spitfires built for the war, were a scant couple of miles away at Castle Bromwich Aerodrome Factory. I can still hear the whine of the engines being tested throughout the day. My brother remembers seeing a newly minted Spitfire being towed across the street from the factory to Castle Bromwich Aerodrome to be tested. Dunlop Rubber Company which, amongst other things, made the huge tires for tanks and other vehicles was also only a couple of miles or so away. Sometimes we would see huge, swaying amphibious vehicles with massive tires being driven past our house to be tested on the reservoir at the top of the street. I think they were called Ducks.

Suffice it to say that the City of Birmingham suffered hundreds of air raid alerts and 77 actual air raids, some of them brutal, and the longest lasting more than 12 hours.

In case of daytime air raids, the school had 'dug-outs' for us to shelter in. I remember the smell of damp concrete as we climbed down the steep stairs into a long 'room' with benches down its length and a chemical toilet at the end. We did have the occasional daytime raid and I can remember our young teacher taking time in the shelter to paint her fingernails. I also remember some little boys snickering as she climbed back up the ladder after the raid. Most women wore skirts in those days of course.

It was during the war that women did start to wear trousers. It was sensible garb for women working in munitions factories or on the land, manning barrage balloon sites, or serving as Aid Raid Precaution Wardens. In fact, I believe the A.R.P. female wardens were issued with trouser or skirt suits.

As well as the A.R.P. folk to protect the neighbourhood, there were the night watchmen, ordinary neighbours who took turns to patrol outside during an air raid, ready to put out any fires caused by incendiary bombs. To this end, my father was issued with a bucket and stirrup pump which we kept in the front porch. Incidentally, after it was no longer needed for the war effort, (I don't think it was ever actually used) someone had the effrontery to steal it from our porch! I remember my father saying that one night when he and our next-door neighbour were standing on the flat roof of a small factory at the top of the street, the view of all the fires being set was quite spectacular. And I even remember our mother taking us to a bedroom window to look at all the fires raging - like Fairyland, she said. What wonderful fortitude our parents showed.

Another view worthy of note was that of the barrage balloons flapping around in the sky. One day my mother and I counted around 60 of them from an upstairs window. They looked like Jumbo the Elephant and were there to protect us from low-diving enemy planes.

I heard of only one instance of strafing in our neighbourhood. One Saturday afternoon, our parents had gone shopping, leaving us children with the young man doing some indoor painting for us. I started to hear sounds that were not normal and thought there was an air raid in progress although there had been no warning sounded. But the painter tried to convince us that it was the noise of my father's car - as if we didn't know the difference. I remember getting into the pantry under the stairs whilst the painter just joked about it and went about his work. Later, when our parents returned home they told us that an enemy aircraft had dived down very low and was strafing people in the street. I guess that day 'Jumbo' let one through!

An interesting anecdote concerning these balloons occurred one night when the neighbours in the house behind ours were safely (one hoped) ensconced in their air raid shelter. (At the start of the war every household with a garden was provided with an Anderson shelter in corrugated metal pieces. One then had to dig a hole in the backyard and put the parts together before 'burying' the shelter). The man of the house decided to climb up from the shelter to look at the sky. Up above, to his horror, he saw a huge object; assuming it was a land mine - much larger than an ordinary bomb and capable of wiping out a block - he dived into the shelter and yelled at the family to put pillows over their heads. They did...they waited...and waited...and no bomb. Tentatively Mr. Richards went back up the steps...and what was flapping around above his head but a large, ungainly barrage balloon which had escaped its moorings!

The very first air raid alert in our area came as a great surprise...during the period called the Phoney War. In fact our next-door neighbours had not even finished putting their shelter into the ground...so they were invited to share ours. In the dark, I can remember bundles (small children) being passed over the fence and then all of us squeezing into our newly constructed air raid shelter, the adults sitting on dining room chairs! Mrs. Russell said she had forgotten to bring her handbag, but she did have a bag of cookies with her. Nothing happened that night...and soon the All Clear went. The sirens made the most fearful noise; I believe they came from factories which used them to bring the workers on shift. The

mournful wailing of the Air Raid Warning was eerie to such a degree that the feeling of dread it evoked has never left me. When I hear these sirens in a movie or on the radio, my whole body reacts just as it did in the early 1940s. The All Clear was a much nicer sound, being one long note...and with it would always come that sigh of relief...until the next time.

Although, as I have mentioned, daytime raids were not the norm, they did sometimes happen. I was later told that on my birthday one year, probably 1941, the sirens went off 13 times during the day. Did we get used to them? Well, I didn't! I was petrified every time the wailing started, and still tend to draw the sheets over my ears at night. I can remember being awestruck by a young boy named Stanley who, even after the warning had sounded for a daytime raid, walked up and down the street like a little soldier instead of diving into a shelter. I was sure a bomb would catch him! A bomb did catch at least one household on our street, killing a three-year-old. My brother remembers going to view the bomb crater. Those nights spent in the shelter - my brother and I on bunk beds along the sides, my small sister in a little bed across the width, and my parents on a raised wooden platform below - were quite scary. Every time we heard a thud, we would pray that no-one had been hurt. The persistent 'ack ack' of the guns on Cat Hill did give us some feeling of safety, as did the powerful search lights scanning the skies for enemy craft.

By the way, we always knew whether an approaching airplane was one of 'ours' or one of 'theirs' because theirs, Messerschmitts I believe, had engines that cut in and out in a very distinctive manner.

I remember the song they taught us at Sunday School, which we repeated every night: Jesus is with you, Be not afraid; Jesus is with you, All through the raid; When bombs are falling and danger is near, Jesus is with you until the All Clear. I don't know how much it helped, but it was my mantra. I also remember a girl at school composing her own song: Hello, hello, hello; To the shelter we must go. No time to doze; Put on your clothes…(the rest of it escapes me.)

I was told later in life that, when in the air raid shelter, I had announced that I was not afraid to die, but it was the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" that bothered me. We could quote the Bible from an early age in our home.

For a fairly short period, the raids were thick and fast, so that instead of being put to bed in the house and then having to get up and run down the garden path to the air raid shelter when the raids started, we were put straight to bed in our air raid shelter bunks. One evening, however, my father was at the prayer meeting more than a mile away when the raid started. Mother got my brother and me into the shelter and was about to head back to the house to fetch my infant sister, placed under the dining table. However, Mum thought she heard the back gate closing and assumed that our father had returned home and gone into the house and would be with my sister. Several bombs fell around us and then, eventually, Father appeared at the entrance to the shelter. It turned out that Mum had misheard the back gate closing, and he had only just arrived home. It really worried me that my poor little sister had been alone in the house throughout the bombing. I like to I think she was oblivious, being so very young.

Another night that stays with me - I think it was the Night of the Longest Raid - my father had to take one of his employees, Len, to hospital in the centre of Birmingham as he had been injured. On Dad's

return journey, when the bombs started, the tram he was on stopped and they all, including the driver and conductor, went into a nearby public air raid shelter. Dad remembers a piece of shrapnel falling on to the conductor's shoe as they ran to the shelter. The rest of the journey home was a nightmare as public transport came to a standstill and we lived about six miles from the hospital. He remembers taking the lid off one of the smoke screen drums and running from shelter to shelter with it over his head.

All this pales, of course, in comparison to what was going on at The Front and the Far East, but it made its impression on our young minds. Even as children we saw the great courage of folk around us, and that inimitable British sense of humour. One day, one of Mother's sisters came for tea and told us with much laughter of the sights she had seen from the bus. After the nightly attacks, one would see houses torn in half, with the contents - furniture, clothing and suchlike - hanging at drunken angles. Our aunt said she had seen a pair of ladies' bloomers flapping on the telephone wires and we laughed uproariously. Everyone had to laugh, like the shopkeepers who came to work to find their stores razed to the ground and would put up a sign saying 'Business as Usual.' Nobody, least of all Hitler, could kill that spirit.

Many of the older folk had come from the Victorian tradition which encouraged a stiff upper lip. This was taken to its extreme when our vicar lost his only son, Courtney, in the war, at the age of 21. The very day he got the news, the vicar stepped into the pulpit and preached his usual Sunday morning sermon without any reference to his loss.

Of course the war brought out the avaricious side of some people. I heard a factory worker saying that he hoped the war would last a long time as he was making big money in munitions. And the Black Market thrived in the hands of the less-than-honest. Food rationing was fair, but oh, what small portions we were allotted! When the few ounces of butter or margarine per week ran out, I remember having dry toast and almost getting used to it. Our mother would make pastry with liquid paraffin, also known as mineral oil. Needless to say, the resultant concrete-like pastry could crack the strongest tooth. Furthermore, one could not even get the liquid paraffin from the chemist's without taking one's own bottle. We Brummie children laughed at the clerk in the store when she asked in her Cockney accent whether we had brought our 'bockle.'

When the occasional food parcel arrived from Mother's friend in New Zealand or relatives in Australia, we had the short-lived luxury of canned salmon, canned fruit and other delectables. Mum would share the spoils with her friends; also some of our tea ration was given away as we children didn't drink that much tea. There was a generous spirit abroad in those days that would be hard to match today.

I remember that bananas were a rarity. For a long time we had not seen a banana. Then, one day at school a girl arrived with a banana. Such excitement! A banana! Her very best friends were then given a small sliver of this exotic fruit, and her lesser friends a piece of the skin. The rest of us had to be content with lining up at her desk to look at it.

Line-ups would form the moment the greengrocer received a batch of oranges or other rarity. It was common for folk to join a queue and stand patiently for some time and then enquire of others in the line what it was they were waiting for. Our dear old Auntie Alice said she lined up to get a couple of

oranges, and then put up her umbrella, took off her hat and lined up again, in disguise, for a second helping. She had to get enough for all of us!

To encourage folk to be as self-sufficient as possible, the government allowed householders to keep pigs and chickens in their back yards. I can remember for years awakening to the sound of the rooster's call. It was a good idea to make friends with these 'smallholders,' as one might get an occasional egg or side of bacon.

Because we had a little sister, and later a War Baby brother, we were able to share some of their rationed reconstituted orange juice and powdered milk. The juice tasted quite good to our deprived palates. Less appetizing was the plastic-like cheese, the cardboard-tasting ice-cream, and the reconstituted egg powder; even mixed with milk and scrambled, it was a poor imitation of the real thing. But, for the most part, our diet was a nutritious one, with lots of unrefined bread, cream of wheat (called Semolina I believe), home-made blackberry and apple jam, locally harvested potatoes, cabbage, carrots, parsnips, and apples; also fish, liver and onions, bread pudding made from stale bread and sultanas, and stews including rabbit and beef. On our way to school we could buy a penny apple or a halfpenny carrot from the greengrocer; surely a much better snack for us than a Big Mac.

However, our diet had its pitfalls. I came home from school one day to find an ambulance outside the house. Our little sister had contracted the highly contagious para-typhoid fever which the health inspector believed she had caught from either ice-cream or some dubious sausage. She was whisked away to hospital where she was in quarantine for a month. I remember being upset that they would not let her bring home the big teddy bear she had taken in with her. I can also remember looking at her in the hospital through a glass screen. She herself can remember the nurses braiding her hair and tying it with bandage strips.

As mentioned, our butter ration was just a few ounces per week, so one can imagine the chagrin of an aunt when the following happened: She and her daughter had gone for afternoon tea at a friend's, and as a special treat the hostess took out some of her butter ration for the bread or scones. The butter was placed in a dish but was very hard. (The houses were very cold in the winter, there being no central heating and very small fires.) So...my cousin Pat was asked to hold the dish of butter near to the open fire. And then, as my cousin describes it, the entire slab of butter (more precious than gold) gently slid from the dish into the fire! Irreplaceable until the next week's ration cards were stamped.

A similar event happened at our house. Mother's friend had come to stay with us and was the possessor of a 'real' hair comb. All our family had at that point were combs made by my father. He would saw the teeth from a piece of Perspex, or whatever was used in those days. One day all the hair combs were washed, including our friend's real one, and put into the oven above the fireplace to dry. Imagine our embarrassment when they all melted into an amorphous mass...including Mrs. Pearson's 'real' one.

As for the clothing coupons and blanket dockets: Many years after the war, we were still using clothing coupons, and our ingenuity in making do with what we had. Mother made me some very nice shorts from parachute silk; and my red dress was lengthened with a strip of pale green material inserted between the frilly hem and the rest of the dress. We learned to make bracelets from bits of electrician's wire, and brooches from curtain rings and scraps of wool; we would darn socks and stockings, unravel old sweaters to make anew; our mothers would cut worn sheets in two and then bring the sides to the

middle and sew them together. The list goes on, and I don't ever remember feeling deprived. On the contrary, there was a feeling of triumph in making something out of almost nothing.

The war definitely made some of us frugal and appreciative of what we had. I still save string, elastic bands, old cards and wrapping paper. We were 'environmentalists' before the expression had been coined. We took our own reusable shopping bags to the stores, shelled our own peas, grew our own lettuce and vegetables, and learned to make 'cream' with flour! All scrap paper was collected in large white wooden boxes scattered around the neighbourhood. The Rag and Bone man with his handcart would walk up the street shouting 'Goldfish' - the prize for donating some old cloth; I am not sure about the bones.

Gasoline was also rationed and I believe totally unobtainable by ordinary folk. We did get a small gasoline ration when Dad was in business. But...woe betide us if we children were seen in the vehicle by a policeman. I can remember having to lie flat in the back of the van when we saw an officer! We were not doing anything dishonest because Dad was actually out on a business trip and took us along for the ride. But as the war advanced and he had to give up his business temporarily, we did not even have that luxury. However, most of us had bicycles, roller skates, and of course Shanks's Pony.

There were many 'good' things about the war. Britain's generosity in welcoming 'displaced persons' was one of them. The Vicar of Middleton brought over a Jewish nurse and her elderly mother, to escape the Nazis' clutches. Also a girl arrived at our school, a German Jew, who presumably had been saved from internment. We all grieved at the end of the war when we saw the first terrible pictures of the camps. Although today, when the words 'Concentration Camp' are used, one thinks first of Auschwitz, it was Belsen and its horrors that we first learned of. We had a saying: You are so thin, you look like a Belsen victim.

The war brought folk together to fight a common enemy - those were some of Britain's finest days. No, I don't want another war, and yes, I like my creature comforts, but I fear we have lost some of our 'character' over the years...

During the war, a couple of Prisoner of War Camps were built in the countryside about couple of miles away. After the war, and before these men had been repatriated, they were allowed to come around the homes selling their wares - mostly handmade slippers. They would come in twos, and I remember as one of them arrived at our house (and yes, we invited them in) he said "Good Night" instead of "Good Evening" as he entered. Of course that appealed to our childish sense of humour. We were visited by an older couple of men, and then a younger couple. All were courteous and friendly, and we youngsters realised, probably with some surprise, that even though German, they were just pleasant, normal people like us.

As already mentioned, long after the war had ended we were subject to food and clothing rationing. And today, when I occasionally read about the 'austere 1950's' in the U.K. I am quite surprised. They didn't seem that austere to me...after all, we no longer had to lie trembling in the air raid shelter at night or survey the disastrous effects of bombs and land mines the morning following a raid. We didn't have any more Black Out; the cars and bicycles no longer had to obscure half of their headlights. The street lights were turned back on so that we no longer bumped into strangers in the dark. We could leave our curtains open at night, we could throw out our gas masks...we were FREE.

War was ended…

Edith Cunningham
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